

April 18, 2007

The Honorable Bob Filner, Chairman  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

We are writing on behalf of the undersigned American maritime labor organizations to express our strong support for HR 23, the "Belated Thank You to the Merchant Mariners of World War II Act of 2007" and to urge your Committee to favorably report this legislation. The organizations we represent have the privilege of including among our retired and active seagoing members individuals who served our country with honor and distinction during World War II, and their descendents. These World War II merchant mariners are truly representative of the "Greatest Generation", and we are extremely proud of them and the example they have set for all merchant mariners who continue to respond to our Nation's call whenever and wherever they are needed.

General Colin Powell, following the Persian Gulf War, said that: "Since I became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, I have come to appreciate first-hand why our Merchant Marine has long been called our Nation's fourth arm of defense. The American seafarer provides an essential service to the well-being of our Nation as was demonstrated so clearly during Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm . . . ."

We agree wholeheartedly with you that the enactment of HR 23 is necessary "to correct an injustice that has been inflicted upon a group of World War II veterans, the World War II United States merchant mariners." We sincerely thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your initiative in working to address this injustice by sponsoring legislation to provide long-overdue recognition and benefits to World War II merchant mariners. We are also grateful to your colleagues who have cosponsored HR 23 and for their decision to add their names to the bipartisan supporters who are committed to working with you and with us for the enactment of HR 23 this year.

There is not, nor should there be, any debate as to the invaluable service given by American merchant mariners during World War II. In fact, World War II merchant mariners suffered the highest casualty rate of any of the branches of the Armed Forces, other than the United States Marine Corps, as they delivered troops, tanks, food, fuel and

other needed equipment and material to every theater of World War II. Enemy forces sank more than 800 merchant vessels between 1941 and 1944 alone.

As General of the Army, Allied Expeditionary Forces in Europe, Dwight David Eisenhower stated, "When final victory is ours there is no organization that will share its credit more deservedly than the Merchant Marine." Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Theater, said that "The Merchant Marine . . . has repeatedly proved its right to be considered as an integral part of our fighting team."

General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, speaking of the merchant seamen who supported the liberation of the Philippines, stated that "With us they have shared the heaviest enemy fire. On these Islands I have ordered them off their ships and into foxholes when their ships became untenable targets of attack. At our side they have suffered in bloodshed and death . . . They have contributed tremendously to our success. I hold no branch in higher esteem than the Merchant Marine Service."

Finally, President Franklin Roosevelt eloquently and accurately summed up the contributions of America's World War II merchant mariners, telling the country and the world that they "have written one of its most brilliant chapters. They have delivered the goods when and where needed in every theater of operations and across every ocean in the biggest, the most difficult and most dangerous job ever taken."

Yet despite this record of exemplary, indispensable service to America's war efforts, merchant mariners were not given the formal recognition and benefits granted other services by the Congress through the G.I. Bill of Rights in 1945. In fact, no legislation to recognize the contributions made by World War II merchant mariners was enacted until Congress extended limited veterans' status to these gallant American citizens in 1988.

We believe, as you have stated Mr. Chairman, that it is time to correct this injustice. We believe our country has an obligation to the remaining World War II merchant mariners, and to the descendents of those who died during the War and since, to fully acknowledge their service and to give them the measure of benefit called for in HR 23. We ask you and your Committee to take the first step in righting this wrong by favorably reporting HR 23 to the House of Representatives for its consideration.

We again thank you and the Members of your Committee for the support you have shown for the World War II merchant mariners. We ask that our statement be included in the Committee's hearing record on HR 23 and we stand ready to provide whatever additional information you may need.

Sincerely,

Thomas Bethel, President, American Maritime Officers  
Timothy A. Brown, President, International Organization of Masters, Mates & Pilots  
Ron Davis, President, Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association  
Michael Sacco, President, Seafarers International Union

cc: The Honorable Steve Buyer, Ranking